

# Women, Culture, and Violence: Traditional Values as a Threat to Individual Well-Being

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I can sympathize with everything, except suffering.

—Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

It is surely no exaggeration to say that in every culture both women and men have been exposed to random violence emerging from our inability to live in harmony. Human beings have always had a tendency to behave ruthlessly and unsparingly toward those they either find threatening to their own existence, beliefs, and lifestyles or simply deem to be inferior to themselves. Whether the maltreatment has been explained away by reference to the victims' alleged lack of intellect or some visible disparity that seems to deserve ridicule and contempt is of no consequence. When people's moral worth is subject to derision, mockery, and sheer abuse, all attempts at justification are worthless. Even less than extreme degradation and dehumanization may seriously hinder a person's growth and self-esteem.

Women have often been, and sad to say, still are unprotected against both personal and impersonal violence generated by their merely being women. Often such violence manifests itself in physical abuse like rape and battery, but it may also betray itself in forms that are not detectable at first sight. Cultural traditions that restrict the freedom and autonomy of women may be conducive to serious, accumulative harm and therefore may endanger women's pursuit of happiness and well-being.

In this paper I try to show that although so-called traditional male customs and attitudes are still today responsible for a considerable amount of distress and anguish among women, the abandonment of certain liberal ideals, together with blind and unfounded trust in the goodness of traditional communities and their shared values, may seriously jeopardize personal autonomy and decision making and thus decrease women's general well-being. This does not, however, mean that men could not be subjected to the omniscience of those in power. The reason I want to concentrate on women's lot is simply because of the long history of seeing women not only as liable to err but fallible by nature. Also I want to argue that the paramount value given to autonomy in some liberal traditions does not imply a belief in a society where individuals are disrobed of their historical and cultural vestments. What should be kept in mind is that being influenced by one's past does not mean being determined by it.

### What Is Violence?

A simple but clearly deficient dictionary definition states that violence is “behaviour involving physical force intended to hurt, damage or kill.”<sup>1</sup> When we hear or read about real-life violence or violent acts occurring, it is usually this kind of activity that comes to mind. We may feel anger and helplessness, we may worry for those close to us, and we may feel sympathy for the victims. Those of us who consider ourselves decent human beings take it for granted that some sort of reaction is called for, since we have been taught to see violence as something undesirable, even evil. Despite the fact that violent acts may sometimes be imperative, physical violence is seen as a repulsive product of human existence.

Although physical violence is generally frowned upon, many otherwise civilized members of humanity may tacitly give their approval to non-physical forms of it. This implicit sanctioning may be due to their general ignorance of the ways others feel, it may result from unquestioned prejudices against the unfamiliar or insensitivity to the gibes of the crowd, or at worst it may reflect sheer arrogance and a desire to rule and to feel superior to others. Physical violence or physically violent acts may maim and kill, but so may nonphysical violence—even if the pace may be slower. Non-physical violence may affect only some areas of life and only certain individual decisions, but it may also be intentionally directed to a person’s whole being, restricting her liberty and autonomy as much as any involuntary incarceration would ever do.

Such restriction of freedom and autonomy may find its expression in numerous ways. It may be written in the law or, sadly enough, it may and often does manifest itself in the moral coercion and emotional blackmail used by individuals, families, or communities who believe not only in their own superiority in moral thinking and the supremacy of their moral knowledge but also in their infallible right and might to judge how these values are best implanted and made to flourish among the less knowledgeable. These people, who might well be called “fundamentalists”—whether religious or not—usually seem acutely aware of certain “facts” while viewing other people as mistaken, as Robert Litke points out in “Fundamentalism, Oppression and Violence”:

In fact, the other is perceived as being systematically mistaken: it is the other’s way of life that is the mistake, because of its commitment to wrong beliefs, values, principles, and policies, and so forth, not simply how the other happens to act on some occasion or other. An important part of being a fundamentalist is remaining clear and vigilant about such epistemic matters. This is integral to taking one’s “fundamentals” seriously. This is so whether fundamentalism constitutes the prevailing culture so that it is possible for straightforward cultural imperialism to occur (presumably the case in present-day Iran) or it is external to mainstream culture so one must be content to practice reverse cultural imperialism (as in the case of Moral Majoritarians in the United States today).<sup>2</sup>

The coercive behaviour is not seen as interference with the liberty of action and thinking of others or as power exercised over individuals but merely as beneficial and benevolent guidance. But whether these anticipated benefits are worth the cost depends on the value we are willing to give to individual autonomy. A primitive misconception is to equate totalitarianism with misuse of power at state level and to belittle the fact that groups routinely control the lives of those within the group, seriously infringing the personal right to individual autonomy. As Litke says, the elimination of self-regarding decision-making "constitutes the immobilization and reduction of a person in a morally pernicious way. If anything is psychologically violent, such deep incursions into a person's epistemic and autonomous functioning should count as violence."<sup>3</sup> The longer this violence continues, the heavier it crushes one's self-esteem. As Jerald Richards appropriately remarks:

If a process of dehumanization has occurred over many years, then victims come to think of themselves as inferior and unworthy of respect, and victimizers come to think of themselves as superior and as deserving to do what they wish and to control those under their power. No actual physical harm is required to keep these kinds of arrangements functioning, especially when they come to be sanctioned by custom, tradition, or law.<sup>4</sup>

We cannot think about violence simply in terms of well-defined physical damage, but instead we should keep in mind that the scale of violence covers a wide field of harmful behaviour, so that even if the most discernible form is physical maleficence, our attention ought to be focused on our integrity as autonomous human beings. In Gary J. Acquaviva's words, "A scale of violence will correlate with the degree to which individuals or societies violate our rights to freely author our lives and fully develop our potentials."<sup>5</sup>

### **Is the Belief in Equality and Individualism a Buried Cause?**

The Enlightenment project of progress and universal human civilization was tightly woven into the web of what we call liberal ideals. The vital importance of the extension of the sphere of civil liberties not only to all men but also to women and children has been strongly emphasized in the liberal demand to treat all human beings equally, to allow them to improve their minds and utilize their talents according to their capacities without restrictions based on imaginary "natural" differences. This rejection of the idea of fixed social roles paved the way for the recognition of the freedom and autonomy of individuals to choose their own self-regarding actions and lifestyles and to overlook, if they so choose, the opinions of their families, the supposed values of their ancestors, and the disapproval and possible indignation of their neighbours. If individuals are prescribed an identity just because they happen to be classified as members of a certain social group,<sup>6</sup> their access to different activities easily becomes limited, which in itself may

seriously diminish the well-being of a person whose capacity for deliberation and choice might otherwise be faultless.

The liberal position has, however, been challenged from different angles. Some have claimed that liberal delusion only hides behind its seemingly tolerant front, an unjustifiable faith in Western values and their being authoritative for all cultures and peoples, instead of purporting a genuine acceptance of the diversity of cultural traditions. And some say that the shallow illusions of Enlightenment should finally be discarded in recognition that even if freedom from all-embracing traditions and traditional values may be an indispensable condition of autonomy and self-determination, their focal position and overestimated value should be seriously questioned.

Philosophers like Alisdair MacIntyre, Michael Sandel, Charles Taylor, and Michael Waltzer share the view that liberalism, with its strong emphasis on individuality and the value of individual autonomy and choice, should either be rejected or at least made to respect more traditional values than freedom, equality, and general well-being.<sup>7</sup> They say that human beings are first of all members of their societies and communities, occupiers of their socially and culturally determined roles, and moral agents whose ethical values are defined by the linguistic and historical context in which they live. According to these critics, liberalism is an immoral doctrine in that it does not recognize the need of human beings to belong to groups and form their identities and ethical responses within these groups. And once the cake of custom is broken, there is no return to the emotional security of a caring community.

These ideas have appealed not only to men but also to many women and women philosophers. One of the reasons seems to be that communities can be seen not as voluntary or human-made associations based on covenants, contracts, blind justice, or impersonal rights, which may be seen as vestiges of liberal delusion, but instead as a part of the private rather than the public sphere. This is particularly pertinent because women's activities have traditionally been confined to private matters. The emphasis put on communities promises women more influence as the natural bearers of children and their moral educators than doctrines that operate mainly on the male-dominated social and political levels. The value given to freedom, individual autonomy, and self-chosen values is now seen by many as a failed and profitless enterprise that should be given up, with the corresponding suggestion that we—especially women—should aim to revive a lost moral solidarity.

All these points can, however, be contested. First of all, we can always ask whether it is possible to find out what exactly is the true community, tradition, or way of life for each of us. Whenever we are talking about values and communities there is a lurking potential of essentialism. Is it really well founded to talk about women as a group in connection with values and morality? Or is it just a preposterous idea to assume that there is something morally relevant that all women share, no matter what age and culture they represent? And is this assumption even theoretically possible if we are ready to reject the vulgar form of essentialism, namely, the belief in morally

relevant biological determinants? For instance, Elisabeth Frazer and Nicola Lacey may be right in saying that in existing societies, “social reality is structured in such a way that gender is always one influential factor in determining lived experience.”<sup>8</sup> But to try to derive some morally significant nominators from this stance is a totally different thing. Women don’t constitute a group morally separable from men, and they don’t form a group of their own in the sense that one could claim that the values binding women emerge from shared womanhood and therefore differ from those befitting men.

### Enforced Community Values as a Threat to Women

One principle opponents of liberalism insist upon is that political authorities should commit themselves to the enforcement of a set of community-based values. The state should not be axiologically neutral and let the citizens decide for themselves what values they want to uphold. An examination of this principle uncovers the lethal threat imposed on all women who value their individual worth.

There are three possible sets of values that the state can undertake to enforce within antiliberal, community-centered models. The first set is built on the assumption that nations can be culturally homogeneous. If they could, then the values enforced by the state would be shared by all citizens, and it would be impossible to criticize them. The problem with this alternative is that societies are not, in fact, homogeneous, and attempts to pretend that they are can lead only to the glorification of conservative attitudes, unreasoned chauvinism, and the oppression of minorities and women. Since most antiliberals recognize the worth of religious and ethnic minorities, this is fortunately not the route they are likely to take.

The second option is to enforce the particular values of culturally distinct communities within the state. This can be done, for instance, by setting quotas for ethnic groups in public offices and by encouraging types of education that aim at preserving the traditional habits and customs of these groups. Some communitarians seem to support practices like these.

I can easily see why the (traditionally male) leaders of religious and ethnic groups prefer this model to the neutrality of the state in cultural and gender-related matters. Not only can they go on treating women like sub-human beings, they can also turn to the government for material help in their struggle against liberal and egalitarian ideals. When values are set above individuals in the political sphere, the ones who suffer are the individuals who have not been given the opportunity to choose the values in question. In traditional communities this means, among other groups, women and girls.

Women philosophers who place their trust in antiliberal thinking probably want governments to choose the third possibility, which is to enforce values that are important to women and increase their influence in both private and public matters. These values are often defined in terms of women’s traditional or “natural” role as peaceful childbearers, with an emphasis on the political importance of family affairs.

My question is, what would the result of the official enforcement of values like these be? It should, I think, be remembered that according to antiliberal theorists, individuals are allowed to choose neither their values nor the groups they belong to. The values enforced by the state are not negotiable in the sense that people could decide whether they want to occupy a traditional role in society or not. It follows from these premises that if you are a woman, and if women are natural childbearers, and if the state is duty-bound to enforce this natural link, then you can be legally coerced into having children. Or if you are a woman, and all women are life-preserving and peace-loving creatures, you can be legally prevented from joining the army.

I know that many women do not see these prospects as particularly threatening, because the norms and restrictions they predict are consistent with their own preferences. They themselves *want* to have children, and they themselves *want* to avoid military service, so it does not matter to them that women who think differently (and whom they therefore see as perverted) are forced to fit the mould.

Other women probably do not regard the rules enforced by illiberal governments as threatening, because they believe that women who think differently can make their own choices even if the state encourages the dissemination and preservation of traditional values. These women are simply mistaken about the true nature of liberal thinking. When the state does not dictate what your self-regarding values must be, you can make your own choices, but when the state takes an interest in your personal values, the decisions are no longer yours to make.

During this century enforced community values have decreased so radically in affluent Western societies that many women tend to forget how harmful they really are. It is perhaps a healthy reminder for those women to consider the fate of their sisters in traditionally governed countries like Saudi Arabia and to remember that communitarian theories do not even enable their supporters to criticize the total subjection of women under the religious fanatics of those countries. This of course does not mean that all traditions automatically pose a threat to the freedom of thought. Only those forms of traditionalism that enforce values without toleration for alternatives are to be feared. And even if the enemies of liberal thinking try to warn us about the excesses of toleration, it has to be kept in mind that tolerance does not equal the acceptance of violence against others. Letting people be harmed in the name of tolerance would commit ourselves to harming them by omission. The liberal affirmation of the value of autonomy is restricted to self-regarding and self-chosen behaviour. As a liberal I have to tolerate my neighbour's opinions and views even though I may find them weird, repulsive, or plainly stupid. But I shouldn't put up with her burning zeal to manipulate her surroundings till we all turn into her obedient disciples. Belief in the value of autonomy is a morality that explicitly rejects the possibility of forcing its way into the citizens' private lives—but only insofar as they don't cause serious harm to others.

What should be kept in mind is that it is not only the traditional values upheld by men that may not be consistent with liberal premises. Many

women have adopted Rousseauian views on women's greater natural inclination for compassion, sympathy, and altruistic behaviour in general. This portrayal may be flattering to female ego, but it may also turn out to be both harmful and deceptive. A firm belief in one's greater understanding, capacity for caring, and moral grandeur may easily lead to attitudes that are as constricting as traditional male supremacy. This is well detectable in conservative, antiliberal feminist campaigns. The representatives of this line of thought tend to claim, among other things, that egalitarian morality cannot be other than hostile to the institution of family and that women's distinctive contribution in family life ought to be glorified. As Gisela Kaplan has noted, "when the political climate is particularly hostile to real change for women, the 'retreat into virtue' seems attractive to feminists."<sup>9</sup> If women want to be honest with themselves, they must acknowledge that they are not saintly behaving, peace-loving creatures any more than men are. Instead, they should admit that violence is not to be attributed to men only, especially if and when nonphysical violence is taken seriously. Even if male prisoners clearly outnumber female offenders, female aggression and violence exists, often only in subtler forms. Women as well as men have always been capable of violence, despite the fact that they may be forced to practice it in different forms. For instance, empirical studies seem to show that women are more likely than men to victimize a relative, intimate, or someone they know.<sup>10</sup> Therefore it is of utmost importance to remember, when talking about values, that what we are is not and should not be conducive to what we want us to be.

### **Liberalism: Just One Form of Moralism?**

Liberalism has often been accused of not being any more tolerant a creed than others, merely one form of moralism or at least just a morality among moralities.<sup>11</sup> As Lee puts it:

The essential point to remember about liberal attitudes to law reform is that liberals, like everyone else, want the law to enforce morality—their morality of liberalism. To say that the law should not condemn homosexuality, for example, is perhaps to say that the law should respect citizens' autonomy over their own sexuality. But autonomy is a moral value just as much as the belief that homosexuality is unnatural is a moral value. Of course it is a more attractive value to liberals, otherwise they would not count as liberals, but there is no cause to regard liberalism as necessarily a superior creed solely because it is sometimes represented as being morally neutral. It is not neutral. It is partisan, affirming the value of freedom or of autonomy or liberty. That is one vision of morality and one which many of us find attractive, but it needs to be judged on its merits.<sup>12</sup>

Lee is quite right in claiming that liberalism is a moral doctrine much in the same way as Catholicism and Islamic fundamentalism are. But there is also a marked difference between these doctrines. Belief in the value of liberty or

autonomy is the only public morality that explicitly rejects the possibility of forcing its way into citizens' private lives by legal sanctions. In an Islamic state, citizens are free to act according to the religious regulations of the country; they are not, however, at liberty to omit acting according to them. But in a liberal state the situation is different, since for as long as the citizens abstain from harming each other, they may in their private lives be whatever they ever wish to be. Liberalism aims at regulating only public or other-regarding activities, whereas all other moralities or ideologies seek to control the field of private or self-regarding behaviour, too.

The only morality that should be compared with liberalism is, not any particular ethical or religious doctrine, but the general morality of totalitarianism, the absolute submission of individual interests to an authority. I do not suppose that anybody would voluntarily choose totalitarianism over liberalism, if the particular content of the totalitarian policy were different from her own preferred ideology.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (Oxford University Press).

<sup>2</sup> Litke, R., "Fundamentalism, Oppression, and Violence," in D. Curtin and R. Litke (eds.), *Institutional Violence* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1999), p. 109.

<sup>3</sup> Litke, "Fundamentalism, Oppression, and Violence," p. 111.

<sup>4</sup> J. Richards, in Curtin and Litke, *Institutional Violence*, p. 117.

<sup>5</sup> G. J. Acquaviva, *Values, Violence and Our Future* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000), p. 87.

<sup>6</sup> S. J. Scholz, "The Challenge of Systemic Oppression," in Curtin and Litke, *Institutional Violence*, p. 167.

<sup>7</sup> See, e.g., A. MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (London: Duckworth, 1981) and *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth, 1988); M. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982); C. Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); M. Waltzer, *Spheres of Justice* (New York: Basic Books, 1982).

<sup>8</sup> E. Frazer and N. Lacey, *The Politics of Community: A Feminist Critique of the Liberal-Communitarian Debate* (Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993).

<sup>9</sup> G. Kaplan, *Contemporary Western European Feminism* (London: University College London Press/Allen & Unwin).

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Acquaviva, *Values, Violence and Our Future*.

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, S. Lee, *Law and Morals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

<sup>12</sup> Lee, *Law and Morals*, pp. 15–16.